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ABSTRACT

Recent attempts to predict marital success or failure have explored the explanations couples offer for interpersonal events. To investigate whether positive and negative affect would lead to different causal attributions in a conflict-resolution conversation, 20 married couples were asked to observe a conflict-resolution and a control conversation in which they had engaged. They were asked to segment a videotape for both conversations whenever anything occurred that affected them positively or negatively. Among those segments the most positive and negative events were replayed, and causal attributions for self and for partner were collected. Results indicated that behaviors were seen as positively-motivated in those segments when spouses reported negative affect. Further, behaviors were seen as positively-motivated during conflict-resolution conversations as opposed to control conversations. Wives viewed their behaviors in negative segments as intended, indicating that they accepted responsibility for contributing to negative exchanges. Husbands in better marriages perceived their behavior in negative segments of conflict conversations as intended and negatively-motivated. Thus, self-blame may be related to satisfaction in husbands but to dissatisfaction in wives. (Author/JAC)

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Affect and Causal Attribution in Marital Conflicts:
An Exploratory Study¹

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Abstract

This study investigated whether positive and negative affect would lead to different causal attributions among 20 married couples in a conflict-resolution conversation. In a self-monitoring procedure couples were asked to observe a conflict-resolution and a control conversation in which they had engaged. They were asked to segment a videotape for both conversations whenever anything occurred that affected them positively or negatively. Among those segments the most positive and negative events were replayed, and causal attributions for self and for partner were collected. Causal explanations were factor analyzed yielding three causal attribution measures--evaluation, intentionality, and stability. Results indicated that behaviors were seen as positively-motivated in those segments when spouses reported negative affect. Further, behaviors were seen as positively-motivated during conflict-resolution conversations as opposed to control conversations. These results were unexpected, and seemed primarily due to the high marital satisfaction of the couples. In addition, wives viewed their behaviors in negative segments as intended, indicating that they accepted responsibility for contributing to negative exchanges. Further, the

three dimensions were utilized in a stepwise multiple regression to predict marital satisfaction. When nonsignificant regressions were examined, there was a more or less general tendency for stability ascriptions to be associated with poor relationships. However, when only statistically significant relationships were examined, an interesting pattern emerged in which marital satisfaction was greatest when husbands perceived their behaviors in negative segments as stable (i.e., internal and permanent) and wives perceived theirs as unstable. Results also suggested that husbands in better marriages perceived their behavior in negative segments of conflict conversations as intended and as negatively-motivated. Thus, self-blame may be related to satisfaction in husbands but dissatisfaction in wives. These results were discussed with regard to recent interest in the interplay between affect and attribution, and the role of attribution in relationship conflict (e.g., Orvis, Kelley, & Butler, 1976; Passer, Kelley, & Michela, 1978).

Descriptors: Videotape, Causal Attribution, Affect, Marital Satisfaction

Affect and Causal Attribution in Marital Conflicts:
An Exploratory Study

Recently, there has been an increase in efforts to understand more about intimate long-term relationships, particularly how they are formed, maintained, and ended, and what factors predict their success or failure (Gottman, 1979; Levinger, 1976; Weiss, 1976; Hill, Rubin, and Peplau, 1976; Huston and Levinger, 1978). One promising approach to this area has been to explore the explanations and interpretations intimate couples offer for the interpersonal events they experience (Cunningham, Stambul, and Kelley, 1973; Doherty, 1982; Harvey, Wells, and Alvarez, 1978; Kelley, 1979; Levinger, 1980; Madden and Janoff-Bulman, 1981; Newman, 1981; Newman and Langer, 1981; Peplau, Rubin, and Hill, 1977; Orvis et al., 1976; Passer et al., 1978; Sillars, 1981; Thompson and Kelley, 1981; Tiggie, Peters, and Kelley, 1977). A number of contributors have also recommended the application of attribution theory to marital therapy (Bauscom, 1981; Doherty 1981a,b; Gelles and Strauss, 1979). This resurgence of interest in causal attribution is coordinate with recent attention paid to the role of cognitive variables in marital distress (Epstein, 1982; Epstein and Eidelson, 1981; Jacobson and Margolin, 1979; Weiss, 1978). The proposition that attributions for the causes of behavior are related to behavioral and affective consequences is now reasonably well documented (Brehm and Cole,

1966; Hastorf, Schneider, Polefka, 1970; Kelley, 1973; Riemer, 1975; Shaver, 1975; Weiner and Sierad, 1975).

The suggestion that one's attributions can shape particular emotional reactions has been made, in various forms, by cognitive-behavior researchers and therapists (see Ellis and Greiger, 1977, for a review), and attribution researchers (Ross, Rodin, and Zimbardo, 1969; Storms and McCaul, 1976). Beier (1966) and Kiesler (1979) have proposed that an actor's communications elicit particular emotional responses from the observer; these emotional responses can provide data for the observer in assessing what is causing the other person's behavior.

Affect

Kelley and his colleagues (Cunningham et al., 1973; Kelley, 1979: Chapter 4; Orvis et al., 1976; Passer et al., 1978; Tiggle et al., 1977) have reported that negative affect is salient in intimate couples' causal attribution making. Orvis et al. (1976), for example, have investigated negative behavior by asking intimate partners in (mostly) dating couples to describe previous events for which the two of them had different explanations. Among a total of over 700 examples, almost all were instances of negative or unpleasant behavior.

Similarly, Kelley (1979: Chapter 4) has suggested that negative events are central in determining relationship satisfaction. He cited Tiggle et al. (1977) to suggest that negative behaviors

are salient because positive behaviors tend to be overlooked or taken for granted. Tiggie et al. (1977) requested cohabiting and married couples to list instances of what they wanted their partner to "start" or "stop doing" as well as what to "continue doing". Instances mentioned for the stop/start doing category were interpreted as indicating dissatisfaction. Instances included in the "continue doing" category were conceptualized as rewarding or positive. In the stop/start doing category instances mentioned most frequently included passivity, lack of confidence, and lack of ambition (16.6%); and carelessness, sloppiness, and impulsivity (17.3%). Kelley (1979) has suggested that an absence of these negative behaviors causes no concern, but that their occurrence occasions potential conflict. Yet, although desirable, nowhere in these studies were affect measures taken.

Tiggie et al. also reported that both positive and negative events were stated in stable, general terms. Kelley (1979) concluded that enduring and positive attitudes, rather than specific behaviors are critical in maintaining relationship satisfaction. Yet, the study cited by Kelley (1979)--Tiggie et al. (1977)--did not collect data specifically addressing relationship satisfaction.

Conflict

Human conflict is a field of study that may significantly benefit from attribution theory as attributions are highly salient in conflict. For example, Sillars (1981), in a pair of studies on conflict in roommates, reported that attribution of respon-

sibility for conflict influenced roommates' selection of communication strategies ("She decided not to talk"; I told her she had to conduct herself in a more mature way"). Orvis et al. (1976), similarly, have gone so far as to propose that: "The attributional process will be evoked primarily in situations of conflict of interest" (p. 379, italics omitted). Recent efforts by Orvis et al. (1976) and Passer et al. (1978), intended to address couple's attributions during conflict have examined attributional conflict. Yet, critical examination of these studies suggests that attributional dimensions used during actual couple conflict were not examined. That is, "attributional conflict" pertained to those cases in which one spouse is annoyed that his or her partner had made unwarranted inferences regarding the spouse's behavior (Kelley, 1979). Consequently, the term attributional conflict designates instances in which the partner explains behavior in a way that the spouse cannot accept, for example, viewing the spouse's forgetfulness as intentional forgetfulness. Still absent in this literature, however, are efforts to address causal attributions that occur during intimate conflict. To define conflict as "disagreement about causes" (Kelley, 1979) introduces a circularity that precludes separating conflict and causal attributions, to examine conflict as a factor that independently mediates attributions.

Actor-Partner Differences

A number of studies by Kelley and his colleagues provided

above indicated results consistent with Jones and Nisbett (1971), suggesting a need to distinguish between explanations given for self versus for other behavior. For example, Orvis et al. (1976) reported a consistent pattern of differences between actors' and partners' explanations. Partners' explanations tended to be stated in terms of actors' personal properties, e.g., inability or poor judgment. By contrast, actor behavior was seen as caused by the actor's attitudes, e.g., negative attitudes toward the partner. There was also a tendency, though substantially weaker, for partners to view the behavior of actors in terms of indirect consequences such as to make an impression upon others or project a particular image.

Discrepancies between self and other attributions have been frequently cited as a source of marital disturbance. A frequently cited cause of marital distress, for example, is a distorted perception of the spouse by the partner (Laing, Phillipson, and Lee, 1966; Murstein and Beck, 1972; Tharp, 1963). This tendency is also indicated by the lack of reliability of clinic spouses' reports in describing their own and their partners' behavior (Olson and Rabunsky, 1972). The nature of causal attributions made by spouses as to why conflict exists and who is responsible may be faulty and asymmetrical (Thomas, Walter, and Flaherty, 1972). One typical "asymmetry" indicated the salience of divergent perspectives between spouse and partner in distressed marriages (cf. Jones and Nisbett, 1971). Further, one of the typical claims of spouses who seek marital therapy is that the problem is largely attributable to the spouse, a finding that is

particularly true of wives (Gurin, Veroff, and Feld, 1960). In fact, Olson (1972) has indicated that couples in therapy have such discrepant perceptions of the same behavior that behavioral interventions should incorporate observational skills training.

Yet, although suggestive, findings extrapolated from social psychology that actors make situational attributions while observers make dispositional attributions, cannot be arbitrarily assumed to generalize to marriage and marital interaction. As noted by Wright and Fichten (1976), the generality of previous research on actor-observer differences is limited for a number of reasons. Initially, only two studies (Miller and Norman, 1975; Storms, 1973) have been reported that utilized situations in which the observer was interacting with the actor; in both studies the interaction was between strangers. Miller and Norman (1975) used a highly artificial interaction situation (the Prisoner's Dilemma Game); the actor and observer never directly viewed or even heard each other. Moreover, the absence of interpersonal conflict makes these results inapplicable, because conflict seems to be an inevitable characteristic of marriage, and implicated as an important indicator of marital distress. The need to study conflict is especially evident when one considers that conflict can result in actors' underestimation of situational causation, and overestimation of the causal role of the "opponent" (Kelley, 1972).

Communication

Marital interaction would appear to be a special form of communication. Potentially, social perception and causal attribution may be different in marital interaction (particularly distressed interaction) because: a) distressed spouses are found to be high on negative problem-solving behavior, and low on positive behavior change operations (Vincent, Weiss, and Birchler, 1975); b) each spouse is both an active observer and actor; c) each has extensive information about own and spouse's behavior in similar situations; d) the situation is one of conflict, and e) motivational variables should be highly salient (Wright and Fichten, 1976; Kelley, 1979; Stierlin, 1974). A position widely adopted by clinicians is that disturbed and ineffective communication is a primary indicator and cause of marital distress (Gurman, 1975). This view is consistent with the results of self-report studies, in which lack of communication is the most commonly cited presenting complaint of disturbed spouses (Greene, 1970). "Disturbed communication" has been reported to be associated with marital distress in the contexts of problem-solving behavior (Gottman, Markman, and Notarius, 1977; Gottman, Notarius, Markman, Bank, and Yoppi, 1976; Vincent, Weiss, and Birchler, 1975), expression of empathy and support (Satir, 1964; Elly, Guernsey, and Stover, 1973), and communication of inconsistent messages (Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, 1967).

Purpose of This Study

In the present study an effort was made to address some shortcomings of previous research by utilizing a self-monitoring procedure that incorporated videotaped feedback. Videotaped feedback was utilized to potentially increase the realism and specificity that are not available to couples in responding to retrospective self-report questionnaires. In addition, the vast majority of the studies referenced above have shied away from real conflict and trivialized the experimental context for interaction. This neglect has even led Wright and Frichten (1976) to conclude, in reference to behavioral marital therapy, that "the role of causal attribution in marital disturbance has never been examined" (p. 224). Rather than utilizing hypothetical tasks such as role-playing, the present study requested couples to try to discuss and resolve personally meaningful problems.

The questionnaire methodologies used in efforts such as that of Orvis et al. (1976) involved retrospective reporting. The use of retrospective reporting in questionnaire interviews can potentially bias results by encouraging subjects to see acts in terms of traits and dynamics, rather than actual behavioral co-occurrences (cf. Mischel, 1968; Shweder, 1975). Consequently, the use of such procedures may have pre-empted the possibility in Orvis et al. (1976), Tiggie et al. (1977), and similar studies of subjects inferring more situational than dispositional causes. A methodology is introduced in the present study that is intended to allow appraisal of "event-by-event" activity.

A question facing any investigation on attribution concerns the optimal unit of analysis with which to sample causal perceptions. The unit of analysis typically incorporated in lay causal analysis has been demonstrated to vary, with such variation having implications for causal inferences (e.g., Newton 1976). Yet, the implications of studies on unit of analysis are ambiguous. For example, Newton (1973) initially reported that fine-unit analysis results in increased dispositional attributions, whereas large-unit analysis was found to yield more confident and differentiated causal impressions. Subsequently, Frey and Newton (1973) reported finer-unit analysis to yield situational attributions. Gottman (Note 1) has recommended an alternative self-monitoring procedure in which videotaped events are marked off that affect each spouse positively or negatively. A pilot study (Gottman, Note 1) indicated this procedure as promising. Consequently, the present study utilized positive versus negative affect to control the information available to couples as they made causal attributions. Intervals in the stream of behavior for causal analysis were identified by the partner subjectively rather than on an a priori basis.

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, this study investigated whether negativity of affect influences the way partners conceptualize the causes of their own and their spouses' behavior. In addition, the nature of couples' causal attributions across a conflict-resolution versus a control conversation was examined. A conflict-resolution conversation was incorporated because disturbed or ineffective patterns of

communication are widely believed by clinicians to be responsible for marital distress (Gurman, 1975; Knox, 1972). That a conflict-resolution conversation is appropriate to capture behavior relevant to marital success was also suggested by self-report data of married couples in that lack of or ineffective communication is a typical presenting complaint in marital therapy (Greene, 1970). The second purpose of this investigation was to examine the linkage between those attributions observed and the degree of partners' relationship satisfaction.

Method

Sample

Twenty married couples were recruited via newspaper announcements and notices posted on public bulletin boards requesting their participation in a study on marital communication, for which they would be paid. Community organizations (e.g., YMCA) and campus housing for married students were contacted and their director's help enlisted to recruit couples. Couples had been married on the average 4.9 years ($SD = 5.1$). The average number of children of these couples was approximately one. The average age of spouses was 27.4, with a range from 18 to 45. Average income per family was \$6,641 ($SD = \$5,034$). Each spouse also completed the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke and Wallace, 1959). The average Locke-Wallace score for husbands was 112.65,

with a range of 77 to 139. For wives, the Locke-Wallace scores ranged from 64-140, with a mean score equalling 112.60. All couples were paid a \$10.00 honorarium for their participation. Of 23 couples initially expressing interest in the study, three finally dropped out because of the time requirements.

Materials

Conflict-Selection Questionnaire. A conflict-selection questionnaire was specifically devised to aid couples in the selection of a topic of disagreement to discuss. The couple was required to jointly decide upon a topic, and then individually complete the conflict-selection questionnaire. Consequently, it was possible to assess each spouse's point of view. The conflict-selection questionnaire was developed to identify: a) the topic to be discussed; b) own point of view; c) estimation of partner's point of view; d) severity of the conflict; e) the duration of the conflict; and f) the ease versus difficulty with which the conflict could be resolved.

Positive Versus Negative Affect Measure. Affect ratings were collected from each spouse at the end of each videotaped interval they segmented during the self-monitoring session. Affect ratings were on a scale from 1 (extremely positive) to 7 (extremely negative).

Causal Attribution Statement Measure. This questionnaire elicited short statements or phrases from each spouse to allow them to explain their own and their partner's behaviors. A statement regarding "causes for spouse's behaviors" as well as

"causes for my own behaviors" were required for each interval segmented during self-monitoring.

Causal Statement Rating Measure. A 16-item list of bipolar items taken from Passer et al. (1978) was used for each spouse to rate the sentences collected previously with the causal attribution statement measure. Specifically, each sentence or phrase was rated with regard to 16 dimensions (Passer et al., 1976) to capture dimensions relevant to interpersonal causal attribution. This rating device incorporated a semantic differential format, in which the statement or phrase was written at the top of the page with each item presented as a seven-point, bipolar scale.

Procedure

Following an initial screening session couples were requested to return for four subsequent sessions. The purpose of each of five sessions and the procedures employed are described below.

Session 1: Screening. The initial screening was primarily intended to establish rapport. The intent of and procedures used in the study were summarized. The couple was informed that they would discuss "meaningful" or "personally relevant" topics, and that their conversation would be videotaped. After the couple's questions or concerns were addressed, they were requested to fill out a standard demographic information sheet, and the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke and Wallace, 1959). Both the demographic questionnaire and the Locke-Wallace were completed by the husband and wife individually. In addition,

the couple took home the conflict-selection questionnaire to complete individually.

Session 2: Videorecording. Approximately one week later the videorecording session was conducted. The couple was reminded of the videorecording session activities; namely, that they would be required to engage in two different conversations, one to share events of the day (condition taken from Levenson and Gottman, in press), and the other to resolve a disagreement. Before initiating these conversations, however, a brief rehearsal was conducted to reacquaint the couple with the videotaping task and to allow the control and conflict-conversations to be as natural and typical as possible.

Initially, the experimenter requested the couple to select a topic for rehearsal that was typical and personally meaningful. It was suggested that most couples have issues on which they needed to make a decision, and that these issues are often appropriate. Examples were suggested, including: "Should we rent an apartment or a house"; "Which set of parents should we go visit?"; "Should we spend money on a special purchase or should we save money?" Topics were recommended to facilitate a rapid choice. This was done only for the rehearsal conversation, and not for either the control or the conflict-resolution conversation.

The couple used approximately five minutes to decide upon a topic before beginning the rehearsal. It was suggested that the couple take approximately three minutes to consider their feelings and what they wanted to communicate. They were re-

requested to sit silently for one minute before the conversation. The couple was allowed a five minute period to rest. Subsequently, the couple engaged in the conversation in which they shared events of the day. They had previously been requested not to discuss these events on the way to their current session. The couple began after a one minute period of silence. They were allowed from 10 to 15 minutes for the "sharing events" conversation.

For the conflict-resolution discussion the couple was asked to try to resolve the topic of recent disagreement they identified in their conflict-selection questionnaires. Conflict topics finally mentioned most frequently were concerned with the spending of money, relationships with relatives, discipline of children, and the choice of recreational activities. The couple was asked to try to arrive at a mutually satisfying resolution to their particular conflict.

While one experimenter introduced the conflict resolution task, the other carefully reviewed each partner's conflict-selection questionnaire. This second experimenter then briefly summarized the topic, attempting to describe the two sides of the argument as evenly and fairly as possible. The conversation began with a one-minute period of silence. Extensive efforts were made to make the couple feel at ease. The couple was allotted from 10 to 15 minutes to try to resolve their particular disagreement. It should be noted that the specific duration of each conversation was left up to each couple. They ranged from approximately eight to fifteen minutes.

Session 3: Affect-Indentification. Approximately one week later an affect identification session was held. After an initial period to reacquaint the couple with the intent of the study and discuss any questions or concerns, activities for the affect identification session were delineated. It was established that the tapes from the last session would be replayed. One of the experimenters then went with one of the spouses to an adjacent viewing room for the self-monitoring task. The order of viewing (husband or wife) was counter-balanced across couples.

The spouse in the viewing procedure was told:

What we would like you to do is to identify different segments in the two discussions you had last week. To do this, you should push this button (pause) whenever something occurs in the discussion that affects you positively or negatively. When you push the button, the tape will stop. At this point, we would like you to rate how positive or negative the segment was on a series of scales.

The spouse then viewed the tape, pressed the pause button whenever something occurred that affected him or her positively, or negatively, and rated how positive or negative the segment was on the positive-versus-negative affect measure.

Session 4: Collection of Causal Attribution Statements.

Approximately one week later, the causal statement session was scheduled. Those videotaped intervals selected during the affect identification session were replayed, and causal attributions were collected for self and other after each segment. While one partner was conducted into a viewing room for this task, the other waited in the interview room with the second experimenter. Self-monitoring order (husband

versus wife) was counter-balanced across couples. The attribution statement questionnaire was administered to the spouse in the viewing procedure; a causal attribution statement or phrase was elicited at each subjective breakpoint. The spouse was informed that they should give "gut impressions" of the videotaped segments. At the end of each segment, they were to indicate what in their opinion caused their own behaviors (actions and statements), as well as their partner's. The partner was asked to make his or her causal statements as detailed as possible.

To illustrate the attributions, spouses provided the following examples of their statements from the self condition.

- I wasn't paying attention.
- I was feeling nervous.
- I didn't want to insult his sister.
- I wanted to make a point, but not hurt his feelings.
- I reacted warmly - I felt good about her positive emotions.
- I was being assertive; I didn't agree with his interpretation.
- I was perturbed at her.

The following causal attribution statements are examples from the partner condition.

- He made a good point.
- She enjoys telling stories.
- He was playing with moustache out of nervousness.
- She was looking for a reasonable answer.
- He was afraid that he couldn't express himself.
- He was interested in what I was saying.
- He was frustrated.

Before beginning the self-monitoring procedure, it was determined that the spouse fully understood this task. Understanding was demonstrated after the spouse was able to restate the task in his or her own words, and could engage in practice attributions for self and partner for one minute of videotape.

Session 5: Rating of Causal Attribution Statements. The causal statement rating session was scheduled one week later. Those statements or phrases provided in the causal statement session had been typed out at the top of each rating sheet. Thus, above each set of 16-bipolar scales a causal statement they had previously provided was introduced with the word "because"; e.g., "because he pressured me into it", or "because he was angry with me". The husband and wife completed the rating procedure independently in the interviewing room. The experimenters clarified any misunderstandings about this procedure. The purpose of this session was to allow the couple to subjectively rate the causes they had provided on a series of descriptive scales.

Insert Table 2 about here

Results

The analyses included: (a) a factor analysis of the 16 items of the causal statement rating measure, (b) three repeated-measures analyses of variance within couple in which sex, conversation type, stimulus for attribution, and affect were crossed to predict the three causal attribution variables identified by the factor analysis, and (c) twenty-four stepwise multiple R 's in which the three causal attribution dimensions were utilized to predict marital satisfaction. These 24 multiple R 's were "sorted" by a crossed design that incorporated as factors, Sex, Conflict, Stimulus (for attribution), and Affect. Each of these analyses is in turn discussed.

Factor Analysis of 16 Attribution Items

An initial, principal components analysis was performed to determine the simple structure of the 16 causal statement rating items. Inspection of the eigenvalues by the Skree technique indicated that the 16 scales had an underlying three-dimensional structure. Subsequently, an oblimax rotation was chosen. The identification of three dimensions corroborated the findings of Passer et al. (1978) who initially developed the 16 items. Using a multidimensional scaling procedure, Passer et al. (1978) identified two 2-dimensional solutions, reflecting judgments of causes from an actors' and a partners' perspective. The first dimension for both solutions was interpreted as "positive attitude". For the second dimension, "unintentional" was identified in the actor condition, whereas "circumstances or states" was identified in the partner condition. The present factor analysis favored a similar interpretation. These factors were labelled as evaluation, intentionality, and stability. Evaluation was reflected in the items good, moral, appropriate, sincere, strong, attitude toward spouse, and benefits spouse. Intentionality included deliberate, voluntary, and intentional. Stability included permanent, inside-the-person, person's trait, and function-of-the-person.

Analysis of Variance of Evaluation, Intentionality and Stability

The initial question addressed by this investigation was

whether spouses' attributions for themselves and for each other vary as a function of positive or negative affect, given the presence or absence of conflict. To shed light upon this question, three separate repeated-measures analyses of variance were conducted, incorporating evaluation, intentionality, and stability as dependent variables. These variables were mean scores; items were grouped according to the factor solution and then averaged. The independent variables included Couple (a random variable similar to a subjects effect in most experimental designs), Sex (husbands, wives), Conversation (control, conflict resolution), Affect (positive, negative), and Stimulus (for self, for other). The Affect factor was calculated by grouping the affect ratings of the segments by the midpoint of the scale, 1-3 versus 4-7. After such grouping three of the most positively-rated and three of the most negatively-rated segments were utilized, of the total number of segments initially selected (random selection given ties) for the levels of the Affect factor. The Stimulus factor was a repeated measures effect across self and other. Only selected significant or marginally significant effects are interpreted below.²

The analysis of variance indicated that the causal attributions couples offered differed primarily as a function of quality of affect (positive versus negative), and type of conversation (control versus conflict). With respect to evaluation attributions, there was an unexpected tendency for

more positive attributions to be made for negative segments than positive segments, $F(1,19) = 17.25, p < .001$. One potential explanation for this finding is that the spouses may have been apprehensive, since they had been informed that the study sought to identify attribution processes that discriminated distressed from nondistressed married couples. That is, they may have been fearful of appearing distressed and were therefore motivated to give themselves and their partners the "benefit-of-the-doubt", providing positive causes for behaviors in negative segments. Spouses also offered more positive attributions during conflict conversations than during control conversations, $F(1,19) = 32.275, p < .0001$. Examination of an interaction (Conversation x Stimulus) also suggested that this tendency was more pronounced for ascriptions to partner's behaviors than to self behaviors, $F(1,19) = 6.72, p < .02$ (see Figure 1). Consequently, spouses may be seen as having been fearful of having a distressed marriage in that they were most charitable in making attributions for negative segments, conflict conversations, and their partners' behavior.

Insert Figure 1 about here

With regard to intentionality attributions, there was a greater tendency for behavior in negative segments to be perceived as intended than behavior in positive segments, $F(1,19) = 5.628, p < .03$. This effect was also qualified by both a two-way interaction and a three-way interaction. The latter interaction (Sex x Affect x Stimulus) indicated that

wives, but not husbands, rated their behaviors in negative segments as intentional, but rated their behaviors in positive segments as unintentional (see Figure 2). This pattern suggests that wives may have seen themselves as responsible for contributing to negative interactions. Post-hoc comparisons with the Newman-Keuls procedure indicated that no two means of this interaction were significantly different from each other. However, the interaction clearly appeared valuable to interpret, because it qualified the results of the main effect and of the two-way interaction.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Stepwise Multiple Regressions Predicting Marital Satisfaction
from Evaluation, Intentionally, and Stability

The second question addressed in the present study was whether spouses' causal attributions vary as a function of their marital satisfaction. As noted, attributions were hypothesized to covary with affect, conflict, and attribution stimulus. Consequently, these factors were crossed and the relationship between causal attribution and marital satisfaction was reassessed for each combination of these factors. Stepwise multiple R 's estimated the relationship of the attribution factors of evaluation, intentionally, and stability with marital satisfaction. A total of 24 stepwise multiple R 's were computed, one for each experimental cell within a crossed design that incorporated the following factors and levels: Sex (male, female, and combined),

Stimulus (self versus other), Affect (positive versus negative), and Conversation (control versus conflict-resolution). Table 1 displays the R-squared value associated with each predictor in the regression model after all variables meeting a .50 criterion probability were entered; the associated beta; and the probability level corresponding to the F-ratio testing whether the beta was significantly different from zero.

Table 1 indicates that the evaluation factor was not a very general predictor of marital satisfaction. However, the one statistically significant effect proved informative. Marital satisfaction was related to the tendency of husbands to give negative attributions for their own behavior in negative segments of conflict conversations. A similar pattern was found for the intentionality factor. Marital satisfaction was related to the husbands' tendency to perceive their behavior as intended in negative segments of conflict conversations. Further, stability was found to be a very general predictor of satisfaction. Across Sex, Affect, Conversation, and Stimulus, stability attributions (i.e., ascriptions to internal and permanent causes) were associated with poor relationships. Notably, however, this tendency was statistically significant only for self attributions and for negative segments. Further, examining only the significant relationships discloses an interesting pattern in which satisfaction is greatest when husbands perceived their behaviors in negative exchanges as stable but wives view theirs as unstable. Consequently, self-blame may be related to satisfaction in husbands but dissatisfaction in wives.

Insert Table 1 about here

To test the validity of this interpretation, couples' causal attribution statement questionnaires were reviewed. Spouses' original protocols tended to confirm the pattern obtained from the regression equations, i.e., that self-blame is linked with satisfaction in husbands, but dissatisfaction in wives. To illustrate this pattern, a number of representative causal attribution statements from negative segments of conflict conversations of a distressed married couple and a nondistressed married couple, are respectively presented. The following causal attribution statements were taken from the wife in the sample distressed marriage. The wife's Locke-Wallace score equalled 64, and the husband's score was 106. A consistent tendency on the part of the wife to blame herself is illustrated by the kinds of reasons she gave for her own behavior. The following are several of the explanations that she gave for her behavior in different negative segments.

Small point.
I was just quibbling.
I was trying to be agreeable and go with the majority.
I didn't want to go if he didn't want to.
I was being too pushy.
Twisting my foot, my nervous habit.
I was leading him into answering an unanswerable argument.

Although the distressed wife tended frequently to blame herself, she also made no attempt to "justify" or "excuse" her

husband. The distressed husband, however, tended to explain his own behavior by offering excuses or providing justifications. These excuses and justifications are clearly evident in the following sample of statements.

I thought the sarcasm was unnecessary.
I thought the verbal play was funny.
I didn't like the tone implied in the big "but".
Once again I decided.
I thought she recognized the truth in my comment--or at least its irony.
I didn't like her "submitting" to something she'd blame me for later.

Interestingly, the distressed husband typically referred to his wife as a causal agent in explaining his behavior. Two of the distressed husband's causal attribution statements that he used to explain specific behaviors of his own exemplify this tendency particularly well.

She would have done it, and she wouldn't have liked it.
She was behaving peevishly.

Finally, when distressed husbands inferred causes for their wives' behavior, they tended to attribute negative motives.

She acquiesced and didn't want to.
She peered at the impracticality of my response.
She thought that I would make the decision, and didn't like that.
She thought my response indifferent.
She didn't like my emphasis on academic work.

The nondistressed couple clearly exhibited a different attributional pattern. The nondistressed wife's Locke-Wallace score equalled 130, and the husband's score equalled 117. First of all, the nondistressed wife did not blame herself.

I was feeling good about the agreement.
I was trying really hard to understand him.
It felt good to be keying in on what each of us was saying.

I was trying hard to be flexible, even when it hurt.
I was being assertive about my thoughts.
Both of us had the same emotion; he was complementing me.

Further, neither did the nondistressed wife blame her husband.

He enjoyed the good interactions.
He was being very honest, without being defensive.
He was listening very hard to what I was saying; trying to be fair.
He was listening, but I'm not sure he picked up on my flexibility.
He was agreeing with what I said; agreeing with my analysis.

Also consistent with the regression equations, the non-distressed husband (unlike the distressed husband) accepted responsibility for contributing to negative exchanges.

I didn't respond particularly well emotionally or nonverbally, even though her idea was an interesting one.
I was thinking, somewhat distracted.
I was making a point ("escape") and responded to her interpretation analytically rather than emotionally.
I threw away a piece of lint as if to punctuate my sentence (a bit emotional and slightly negative).

Finally, the nondistressed husband did not blame his wife in these negative segments of conflict conversations. Quite the contrary, the nondistressed husband frequently inferred positive causes for his wife's behavior.

She had a good idea and shared it in an interesting, expressive way.
She liked the way she was analyzing the problem, explaining, yet trying to encourage, support and be honest about her feelings.
She was trying hard to be honest, challenging herself to consider Israel as a trial period rather than a permanent move.
She liked both the emotion and the content of the interaction and showed it verbally and nonverbally.

Discussion

The most striking finding to emerge from this study was the pattern in which satisfaction is related to husbands seeing their behaviors in negative exchanges as stable, but wives seeing theirs as unstable. This finding suggested that dispositional self-blame (via stability ascriptions to self in negative exchanges) is related to marital satisfaction in husbands, but to dissatisfaction in wives. In other research stability attributions have been typically found to be related to psychopathology, e.g., depression (Abramson & Martin, 1981). By contrast, stability ascription was associated in this investigation with marital dissatisfaction in wives, only. This finding is particularly noteworthy in that there was also a general tendency for them to blame themselves in negative segments. That is, wives perceived their behaviors as intended in those exchanges they found extremely negative. Although an alternative explanation is possible (e.g., that when wives rated their behavior as intended in negative segments, they were referring to themselves as strong and rightly upset), the "self-blame" interpretation seems defensible. First, the interpretation that wives blamed themselves stands if "self-blame" is employed broadly to designate acceptance of responsibility for contributing to a negative exchange. Second, claiming one's behavior in a negative segment to be unintended would imply (by default) self-justification with

respect to the negative exchange. The converse, of course, implies a tendency to accept negative personal responsibility, i.e., "fault".

The intentionality dimension was a valuable predictor of satisfaction among husbands but not among wives. This finding corroborated the previous pattern, in that "taking responsibility" again appeared related to husbands' satisfaction. Specifically, husbands who acknowledged their behavior as deliberate in negative segments of conflict resolution conversations tended to be in better marriages. This finding parallels an extensive literature which suggests that the intentionality dimension relates to a feeling of "being in control" of one's environment, and further, that such a sense of control relates to individual adaptation (deCharms, 1968; Glass & Singer, 1972; Langer & Rodin, 1979; Rotter, 1966; Seligman, 1975; Wortman & Brehm, 1975).

Husbands who attributed their behavior in negative segments of conflict interactions to negative causes (i.e., desire to harm spouse or a negative attitude toward spouse) were also in better marriages. This finding similarly suggests that husbands in happy marriages acknowledge responsibility for contributing to negative exchanges. This pattern further suggests husbands' sense of responsibility and honesty in the relationship are requisite for relationship success. It also indicates the value of a "nontraditional marriage", wherein the husband acknowledges his negative contribution to the

relationship, while the wife forsakes self-blame in favor of viewing negative exchanges as relatively transitory, and situationally-caused, mishaps over which she has control.

Spouses' causal attributions predicted their marital satisfaction significantly only in the behavior segments they found extremely negative. This finding supports research suggesting that negative events play a central role in relationship satisfaction (Cunningham et al., 1973; Kelley, 1979; Chapter 4; Orvis et al., 1976; Passer et al., 1978; Tiggle et al., 1977). This finding is unique in that previous studies, despite their claim that negative events are most predictive of satisfaction, did not measure affect.

The prediction equations were also significant only for segments in which spouses explained their own behavior. This finding is interesting as the vast majority of marital research has focussed upon attribution for partner's behaviors, for example, partner blame (e.g., Glick & Kessler, 1974; Lederer & Jackson, 1968; Nunally, Miller & Wackman, 1975; Sanctuary, 1968).

Spouses seemed to be "defensively" positive in their attributions. In the conflict interactions spouses viewed behaviors as having positive causal sources, a finding that stands in contrast to previous findings that conflict invariably elicits blaming from observers (Orvis et al., 1976). In addition, spouses reported that behaviors were positively motivated in negative segments. This result was also unexpected in the light of previous findings that affective reac-

tions are best predicted by causal attributions during positive acts (e.g., Fincham & O'Leary, Note 2). One explanation for the "defensive positiveness" exhibited by spouses is that they had been informed the investigation sought to identify attribution processes that discriminated nondistressed from distressed married couples. They may thus have been apprehensive about being evaluated, providing themselves and particularly their partners the "benefit of the doubt" by offering positive causes for behaviors occurring in negative segments of conflict conversations.

This defensiveness may have also been due to the relatively high marital satisfaction of the couples. As noted, the mean Marital Adjustment Test score (Locke & Wallace, 1959) was 112, indicating that the couples were primarily nondistressed. Given the results of the present study and the literature on blaming in distressed marriages (Greene, 1970; Newman, 1981; Gurin et al., 1960; Olson, 1972), it would seem that whether spouses are defensively positive or mutually blaming may depend upon their satisfaction.

In this investigation a "divergent perspective" or actor-observer effect was not evident--at least in its strong form (Heider, 1958; Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Orvis et al., 1976; Ross, 1977). The divergent perspectives hypothesis suggests that observers overestimate dispositional causes of actors' behavior, while actors focus upon situational determinants of their own behavior. Orvis et al. (1976) have reported

the existence of this trend among dating couples. Two potential explanations may be offered to explain why a divergent perspectives effect was not found in this study. First, Storms (1973) has reported that reversing the visual perspectives of actors and observers with the use of videotape can lead to marked changes in the visual (and attributional) perspectives of actors and observers. Thus, divergent perspectives were possibly obliterated by use of the videotape procedure, which permitted spouses to see each other's perspective. Second, actor-partner differences in causal attributions can be eliminated when the two parties engage in a discussion in the presence of a third-party observer (Wells, Petty, Harkins, Kagehiro, & Harvey, 1977). Consequently, the absence of divergent perspectives may have also been due to the presence of the two experimenters, which would presumably moderate the emphasis on the principal parties (i.e., the husband and wife).

One potential limitation of this study was that it was occasionally unclear how best to interpret spouse's causal attribution ratings. Development of a content-coding system to organize the domain of spouses' attributional repertoires seems a promising next step for the present research program to suggest, not simply covariances, but how attributions function to increase or decrease conflict, negative affect, or marital dissatisfaction. Causal attributions are likely to have not only an evaluative component, but specific interpersonal con-

tent that varies along an evaluative dimension. Content might therefore be derived by classifying attributions with respect to who is starting a conflict, or who is in the best position to bring conflict under control. Such analysis of spouses' causes might then be of value in understanding why spouses resolve conflict as they do, under what circumstances particular conflict-resolution strategies are likely to surface, and what changes in causal factors would be necessary for different conflict-resolution behaviors to occur.

Footnotes

1. This research was conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Psychology in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Copies may be obtained from David M. White, Department of Psychology, 236 Psychology, University of Illinois, 603 East Daniel Street, Champaign, Illinois 61820.
2. All data are available upon request from the author.

Reference Notes

Note 1. Gottman, J.M. Personal communication, July 18, 1980.

Note 2. Fincham, F., and O'Leary, K.D. Causal inferences for spouse behavior in maritally distressed and nondistressed couples. Manuscript submitted for publication, 1982.

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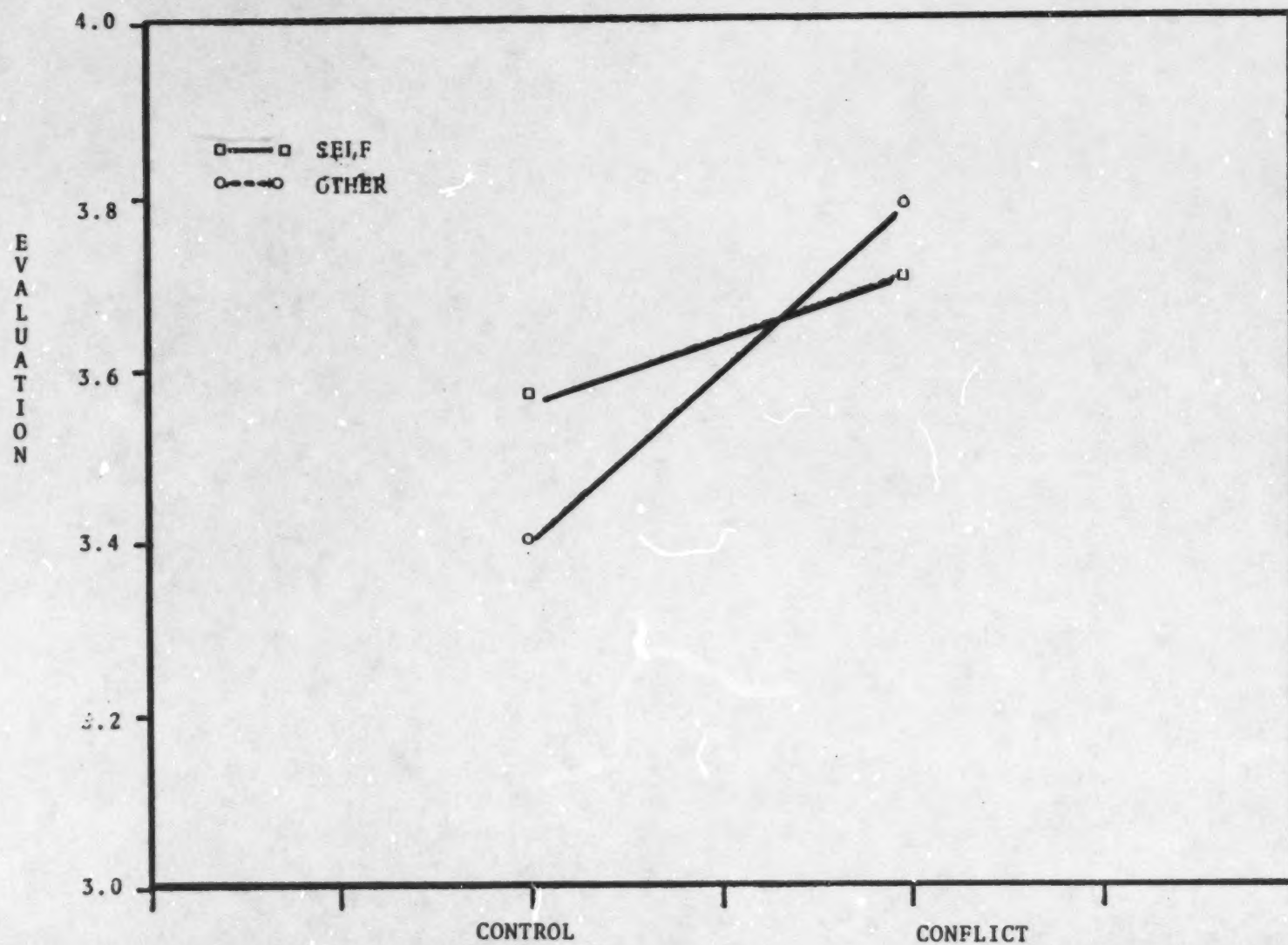
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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Interaction of Conversation and Stimulus on
Evaluation.

Figure 2. Interaction of Sex X Affect X Stimulus on
Intentionality.



Causal Attribution
47

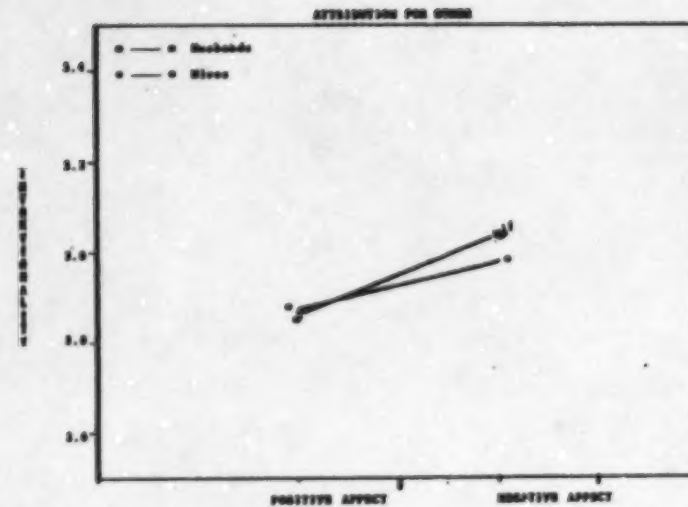
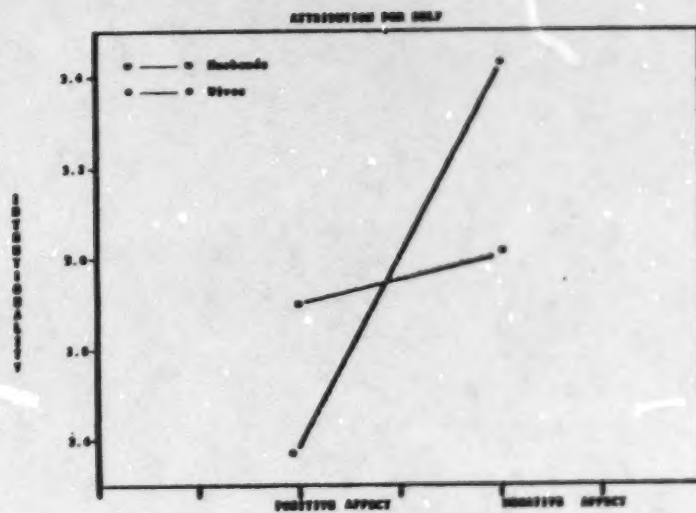


Table 1. Betas for 24 multiple regressions. Evaluation, Intentionality, and Stability are incorporated to predict marital satisfaction. The multiple regressions are sorted as a function of Sex, Stimulus for Attribution, Affect, and Conversion type. The .50 criterion was used for entry of an independent variable into the multiple regression model. To suggest trends all betas significant beyond the .20 probability level are tabled.

Sex	Attribution	Affect	Conversation	Evaluation	Intent	Stability
Both	Other	-	2		2.13; R=.08(.09)	
			1			-1.86; R=.09(.07)
		+	2			-1.37; R=.06(.14)
	Self	-	1			-1.06; R=.05(.16)
			2			
		+	1			-2.26; R=.26(.003)
Female	Other	-	2			
			1			-2.05; R=.14(.11)
		+	2			-1.59; R=.13(.17)
	Self	-	1			-2.86; R=.29(.04)
			2			-2.22; R=.32(.01)
		+	1	1.98; R=.19(.16)		
Male	Other	-	2		2.60; R=.19(.08)	
			1			-2.39; R=.14(.14)
		+	2	-1.42; R=.09(.20)		
	Self	-	1		3.13; R=.17(.20)	
			2	-2.31; R=.54(.025)	8.36; R=.54(.0005)	2.75; R=.54(.03)
		+	1			-2.11; R=.12(.14)
	2		3.83; R=.19(.06)			
	1			-1.40; R=.12(.15)		

Note: Affect is represented as either positive (+) or negative (-). Conversation is represented as either control (1) or conflict resolution (2).

Table 2. Measure used by couples to rate their causal attribution statements. Items are taken from Passer et. al(1978).

1. good	____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____:	bad
2. immoral	____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____:	moral
3. normal	____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____:	abnormal
4. inappropriate	____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____:	appropriate
5. insincere	____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____:	sincere
6. strong	____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____:	weak
7. accidental	____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____:	deliberate
8. voluntary	____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____:	involuntary
9. personal	____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____:	impersonal
10. temporary	____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____:	permanent
11. outside actor	____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____:	inside actor
12. negative attitude toward spouse	____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____:	positive atti- tude toward spouse
13. desire to benefit spouse	____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____:	desire to harm spouse
14. intentional	____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____:	unintentional
15. actor's trait	____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____:	not actor's trait
16. characteristic of situation	____:____:____:____:____:____:____:____:	characteristic of actor